

1 Corinthians 3 – Servant leadership

Good Morning Everyone its great to be with you this morning. My name is Tom I look after youth and young adult minister here at the Church@thepeak and I have the joy of having a look at this passage with you this morning. We have been spending this term looking at the book of 1 Corinthians, a letter that the apostle Paul is writing to the church in the greek city of Corinth where he planted the church. A group of people who are working out what it looks like to do church together. Paul is writing to correct and encourage them. Today we are looking at a section where he discusses the way we view leaders and the way leaders should take to their task, we have a lot of people in positions of leadership at church at the peak and so it is important we think about this.

Let me start by praying.

When I was in year 10 I started listening to two preachers on podcasts. Mark Driscoll and Matt Chandler...

...ultimately this leader fell, and it hurt me because his preaching had not convicted me of Christ but his prowess.

Who makes things grow?

Something I regularly experience is people coming up to me to tell me about a new preacher they have started listening to. They tell me about how he just seems to connect with them. That they feel a closer to God in his preaching. They aren't bad things in themselves. But often, the more spectacular they make this person out to be, the more concerned I get with what is actually going on here.

Factionalism around leaders is causing big problems in the Corinthian church.

³You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? ⁴For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere human beings?

People are divided over which teacher who had spent time at their church they are followers of. Some are standing by Paul, the planter of their church, others are standing by Apollos another great teacher and from what we know a committed follower of Jesus. For some reason people have a desire to follow other people. For some of us it is because they fill us with confidence, some because they make us feel safe, some because they make us feel good about ourselves, that we matter because they connect with us. We like human leaders because we can touch and see and hear them right now, they are a rallying point. As they gather a bigger following they become more appealing because we want to be part of that group. Oh I go to his church. He's my Pastor. His preaching makes a church grow. These are things I hear all the time from Christians.

Paul wants to start by pointing out how foolish this is, how unhelpful it is for the church community and how unhelpful it is for the leader themselves.

⁵What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. ⁶I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. ⁹For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building.

Dani and I are not particularly gifted gardeners...
...it is a miracle.

Paul is drawing on a bunch of different Old Testament prophets in this image but at his core he is pointing out that gospel workers, gospel leaders are not the end in themselves, but are simply servants tending to the field on behalf of their master. They have different gifting, different styles, they may play different roles in the process but they are all workers, interdependent on one another. And so they cannot lay claim to the end result because they do not carry out the whole task themselves. It is not the Christian leader who makes the crop grow, only God who does that. Paul is not responsible for the salvation of the Corinthians, Apollos isn't responsible, they simply worked in the field faithfully and then God grew his harvest. Because of that they can't claim ownership of the outcome. But people in Corinth are choosing to follow a servant who was part of the process instead of the God who brought the outcome about.

To make sure his point is clear Paul exaggerates his point. You see in Corinthian society workers in the field were the lowest of the low, there were few images more demeaning than to be compared to that and Paul says that's exactly who they are. One who plants and one who waters and ultimately he says they are nothing. Now they aren't actually nothing, they were two incredible men of God who fought for the gospel. But when they are placed next to the heavenly father who gave his son for the world. Who has redeemed all who turned to him of their sin, who freed the lost from slavery, who has made the blind see. Then every Christian leader is nothing. Just a servant going about their master's business. How can we look to them for our fulfillment, for our identity. We praise them, we criticize them, we rely on them for our daily bread instead of the true provider of the growth. And it is the master who will praise his servants, not us, and it is the master who will judge their work.

Revealed with Fire

Paul goes on to discuss what the ministry of the servant looks like.

¹⁰By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. ¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work.

Paul changes image to those who are builders, contracted by the master to build his temple. Churches, ministries, bible studies. They come in all shapes and sizes. You can go down the

road and experience a very different expression of church. Of the three churches I have been at there have been huge differences between them. That is a good thing. It is good for us to express these things in different ways that suit different people. But there is something of all importance in this, and it is what we are building on. What stands at the centre of a ministry, of a preacher, of a sermon.

This is what we need to be really careful about as we do church together. What stands at the centre, what are the foundations, where is the attention, where is the submission, where is the worship. Building a church is good, making things better is good. But only when the foundations are strong. This is what worries me with some churches and preachers and pressures that we may feel here. That the pressure to grow a church or to satisfy the desires of the community a church or a minister may compromise the message. That we may give into the wisdom of the world of what good looks like in church. Care more about preaching an impressive sermon than one centred on the gospel. Running a service that satisfies our earthly wisdom to get more people in the building. If we just do these things, if we just improve in this way if our minister just preached this way then the church would grow. I mean logically it seems to work in our heads, we look at big churches and think this but would it actually? Would it actually build a church full of people who love Jesus or who are attracted to the wisdom of the world that we have sold out for. Does the one planting the seeds or the one watering decide what grows?

Be wary of a message that makes you love a preacher. Be wary of a church that you love because of what it does rather than what its teaching. Building is good, improving is good, doing things well and enjoying church is good. But only when the foundations are gathered around Christ. Because one day the work of the servants will be judged for what it is.

¹³their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work.¹⁴If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.

The fact is we don't know the intentions of the servants. There will be some will highly successful ministries who are focused on Christ and there will be some who are not focused on Christ and the same is true for the opposite, whatever success means. But one day, when Christ returns the work of the servants will be judged for what it truly is. Intentions exposed, foundations seen. This is a warning for leaders who build on the wisdom of the world, who strive for personal prestige and success. The success will not last forever, your ability to captivate a crowd will not save you when it is shown you abandoned Christ for the sake of personal success. Judgement for these leaders will come.

Of course some will go further than this and may even bring down a church. ¹⁶Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? ¹⁷If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.

This is something we all have a part in, a responsibility towards. As we walk away from Christ we tear down the temple with us. Our leaders are a reflection of our communities

and we need to stop those who take us away from the foundations. If we compromise as people then we will have leaders who compromise too. If we follow a leader because they are engaging and impressive then we will have leaders who pursue those things. But if we are a community who care about our foundations, who are committed to pursuing Christ first and foremost, then we will keep our leaders to this, or we will clearly see when they are not.

You are of Christ

Paul brings what he has been talking about into the points he has already been talking about in our series.

¹⁸Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become “fools” so that you may become wise. ¹⁹For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight. As it is written: “He catches the wise in their craftiness”^(a); ²⁰and again, “The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.”^(b) ²¹So then, no more boasting about human leaders! All things are yours, ²²whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas^(c) or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God

Is the wisdom of the world aligned with your desires for your church? If only church was like this I would be growing closer to God. Do you place all the responsibility on your pastor? If only church was like this then I could bring my friend and finally they would become a Christian. The fact is that Stu could be the best damn planter, John could be the best waterer you have ever seen, I could be making some sweet refreshments to keep them going. But without God we would grow nothing.

It wasn’t a preacher or leader who took the chains of your sin upon himself and walked up that hill to Calvary. It isn’t a preacher or bible study leader who you repent to and who absolves you of the unrighteousness of your heart. It is only through Christ that we are free from our slavery to sin. Do not fall into the trap of seeking your identity in a leader of God’s church, that is just as broken as when we seek it in the world. Look through God’s servants and see the master, look through the presentation of a message and see its foundations. Christ alone sacrificing his glory.

It is only a community built on the Gospel that brings people into the kingdom. It is only through God. That his leaders are mere servants carrying out his work praying that he would do something with it. It is only the Gospel that has the power to save, only Christ crucified and resurrected, the simple but incredible truth that by putting your faith in him we are saved. A preacher can dress that up as much as they want and it won’t improved the truth, it wont make it more powerful, or more saving.

Friends we are all workers in this and we also have an incredible freedom in this. We have an opportunity coming up at church to trust in this. Invite your friends to spring fiesta in the knowledge that it is not you that will bring them into relationship with Jesus, its not the preacher who can save them, but the one who makes things grow. You don’t need to trust in how well you can plant seeds or water or how well your ministers can do those things. Come because your church is founded on the gospel and as long as that stays at the centre then his work will continue.

Friends, Christian leadership isn't about the leader, its is about the master who our leaders serve, who we serve. We do not belong to our leaders, we belong to Christ, and Christ to God.